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ABSTRACT

Self-report measures of perceived communication competence used properly can help build understanding of communication behavior, but used as indications of communication performance can only retard such efforts. Not all uses of such instruments are either legitimate or appropriate--for example, using self-report measures to determine an individual's actual communication competence. None of the scales currently used to measure perceptions is appropriate because none asks the subjects to estimate their perceived competence level, each is based on differing definitions of communication competence resulting in dissimilar items on the measures, and most are restricted to either an interpersonal or a public speaking context. In an ongoing research program related to willingness to communicate, it was found that no appropriate measure of self-perceived competence was available. Consequently, the Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) scale was developed. The SPCC is composed of 12 items chosen to reflect four communication contexts--public speaking, talking in a large meeting, talking in a small group, and talking in a dyad--and three common types of receivers--strangers, acquaintances, and friends. Results of an initial study using the SPCC were compared with those of others completed by the same subjects. The correlations suggest substantial personality influence in individuals' perceptions of communication competence. The strong correlation with willingness to communicate also suggests the potential impact of self-perceived communication competence on actual communication behavior. While the SPCC appears to be a valid measure of self-perceptions, it is not a valid measure of actual communication competence. (HTH)

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SELF-REPORT AS AN APPROACH TO MEASURING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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Abstract

Approaches to measurement of communication competence are reviewed. The self-report approach to measurement of communication competence is examined. It is concluded that self-reports have little validity as indicants of competent communicative performances but may serve as useful measures of self-perceptions which may function as precursors of communicative choices. The Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale is suggested as a measure which can be used for such purposes.

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SELF-REPORT AS AN APPROACH TO MEASURING COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The nature of communication competence has been the subject of considerable controversy over the past decade (Allen & Brown, 1976; Backlund, 1982; Cegalla, 1982; Dance, 1982; Duran, 1982, 1983; Jensen, 1982; Larson, Backlund, Redmond, & Barbour, 1978; McCroskey, 1982, 1984a; Phillips, 1984a; Rubin, 1985; Spitzberg, 1983; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiemann, 1977; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980). Scholars in the field of communication have taken a "Humpty Dumpty" approach to deliniation of this construct. As Lewis Carroll expressed this approach in "Alice in Wornderland" through the persona of Humpty Dumpty, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less."

Recognizing the problems with such an approach, Alice responded "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things." Disagreeing with Alice, Humpty Dumpty asserted "The question is which is to be master--that's all."

In the case of "communication competence," the words have been forced to serve many masters; so many, in fact, that no consensual constituent deliniation of the construct has yet evolved. Short of creating still another definition of the construct, we are forced to select from among the many available definitions. We have chosen the most recent definition advanced by McCroskey (1984a; for other purposes, other definitions might be more useful, including the one previously argued by McCroskey, 1982). From this vantage point, communication competence is "adequate ability to pass along or give information; the ability to make known by talking or writing." We have chosen this definition because it is relatively unambiguous and is consistent with lay interpretations of the construct. The latter is particularly important when working with self-reports of communication competence.

Communication Competence Measurement

Just as constituent definitions of communication competence have varied, so have operational definitions of the construct. Four different types of measures have appeared in the literature. These are 1) objective observation, 2) subjective observation, 3) self-report, and 4) receiver-report.

The objective observation approach is best illustrated by the work of Powers and Lowry (1984). In this approach, known as Basic Communication Fidelity (BCF), sources are given an assigned task to communicate specific information to naive receivers. The receivers are asked to reproduce this information. The average degree of accurate reproduction by the receivers is taken as the measure of the source's competence. This approach is still in the early stages of development, and presently is very limited in its application. However, the approach is very consistent with the definition of communication competence we have chosen for this paper. It directly assesses an individual's "ability to make known by talking or writing." In addition, the BCF approach has the potential for use in virtually all types of communication context, although to this point it has only been applied in a public speaking context.

The subjective observation, or rating scale, approach has been employed to assess communication skills for decades. The Communication Competency Assessment Instrument (CCAI: Rubin, 1982; 1985) is most illustrative of this approach in current use. Use of this approach involves assigning a communicative task to a

speaker and having a trained observer (or observers) rate the speaker's behavior in performing the task on scales designed to reflect aspects of communicative competence. This approach, properly employed, can also be very consistent with our definition of communication competence.

In recent years, the most commonly employed method of communication competence measurement has been the self-report approach (Duran, 1983; Rubin, 1985; Spitzberg, 1983; Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984; Wiemann, 1977). In this approach a series of items determined by the researcher on an a priori basis to be related to communication competence are presented to the subject for self-assessment. Although the self-report instruments currently in use are not isomorphic with our definition of communication competence, there is no inherent reason why self-report scales could not be.

The receiver-report approach has generally evolved from the self-report approach. Self-report instruments are modified slightly and are completed by dyad members with reference to their partner rather than on themselves. This approach, therefore, is very similar to the subjective observation approach, except the observers are interaction participants rather than trained observers. As with self-report scales, receiver-report scales which have been employed typically have not been isomorphic with our definition, but there is no reason why such scales could not be.

It is not our purpose here to provide a detailed critique of each of these measurement approaches. Suffice to say that each has its strengths and each its limitations. Rather, it is our intent to examine the self-report approach in an attempt to determine for what purposes this approach my be useful and for what purposes another approach should be preferred.

Self-Report Measurement

The use of self-report scales has been a hallmark of communication research for decades. Entire research traditions have been built upon use of such measures--attitude change, credibility, interpersonal attraction, communication anxiety and apprehension, to mention just a few. There is no real question, therefore, whether use of self-reports is a legitimate and appropriate research strategy within the discipline of communication. It is. However, not all use of such instruments is either legitimate or appropriate.

It is often argued that the best way to find out something about someone is simply to ask her or him. The logic of this argument is sound, but only if the person knows the correct answer to your question and is willing to tell you the truth. To illustrate: If you ask a person to self-report her/his rate of beta wave production, the person probably can not give you the correct answer, because he/she will not know. However, if you ask that same person how physically attractive he/she thinks a given person of the opposite sex is, the person probably can give you a precise and correct answer. Further, if you ask a friend how fast he/she was driving on a recent trip to Florida, the person will probably tell you the truth. However, if a highway patrol officer were to stop your friend and ask the same question, a little less honesty might be expected in the response.

Self-report measures, then, are most appropriate when they are directed toward matters of affect and/or perception in circumstances where the respondent has no reason to fear negative consequences from any answer given. They are least useful when they are directed toward matters of fact that may be unknown or unknowable by the respondent (McCroskey, 1984b). In the case of communication competence, self-report scales may be very useful if we want to know how communicatively competent a person thinks he/she is. If we want to know how competent the person actually is, such scales may be totally useless, because the person very likely does not know. Many people think they are very competent communicators, when in fact they are not. Others believe they are lacking in competence, when in fact they are very adequate communicators.

Self-report measurement, then, has a place in the overall research effort concerning communication competence. However, its place is not as the approach for determining an individual's actual communication competence. For that purpose, objective and/or subjective observation is called for. Only if a self-report measure is shown to generate scores highly correlated with observational scores can a case be made for its use as a measure of actual competence. No such relationship has been shown for any self-report scale currently in use, nor do we believe such a relationship will be demonstrated for any such scale in the future.

The above should not be taken to indicate that we believe the use of self-report measures in this area must be relegated to trivial or unimportant concerns. Quite the contrary. It is our position that many of the most important decisions people make concerning communication are made on the basis of self-perceived competence rather than actual competence. In short, we believe often it is more important to know what a person believes her/his competence level is than to know what the person's actual competence level is. People make decisions about whether or not to communicate based, at least in part, on how competent they believe they are to communicate well. They also make more global life decisions, such as what career to enter, based at least in part on such judgements. The work of Phillips (1984), for example, clearly demonstrates that people become reticent because they feel they are incompetent communicators, but the work of Kelly (1982) suggests the actual competence of reticent and nonreticent communicators may not differ.

To argue that use of self-report scales for the measurement of self-perceived communication competence can help us answer some important research questions, of course, is not to argue that the self-report scales currently in use are appropriate for this purpose. We do not believe they are. While it would serve no useful purpose here to go into a detailed critique of each of the presently available scales, we do wish to make some general comments concerning the scales which are available to indicate the reasons for our reservations concerning their use.

Most of the self-report communication competence scales we have examined have one very important thing in common--they do not ask a subject to estimate how competent he/she thinks he/she is. Rather, they ask a variety of specific questions which the researcher has decided in advance are related to competence. Not surprisingly, the questions on one such measure are not very similar to those on another such measure. Each measure is based on the definition of communication competence developed by a given researcher, and since definitions differ, so do the resulting items on the measures. Thus, each measure provides

an indirect, rather than a direct, estimate of how competent the subject believes he/she is. Such items, while defensible on theoretical grounds, may have little or nothing to do with the subject's feelings of competence or incompetence, since the naive subjects are not privy to the researcher's theories. Thus, the items have the potential for creating a competence perception where none existed before. The subject may never have considered the idea asked by an item before seeing the item on the measure. In addition, few measures have attempted to measure a broad-based perception of communication competence. Most are restricted to either an interpersonal or a public context.

The Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale (SPCC)

In an on-going research program related to Willingness to Communicate (McCroskey & Baer, 1985; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986 a,b; McCroskey & Richmond, 1986) it was deemed necessary to measure subjects' perceptions of their communication competence. Because a generalized communication competence perception was sought, an examination of the available self-report measures led to the conclusion that no appropriate measure was available. Consequently, the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale was developed (see Figure 1).

The SPCC is composed of 12 items. The items were chosen to reflect four basic communication contexts--public speaking, talking in a large meeting, talking in a small group, and talking in a dyad--and three common types of receivers--strangers, acquaintances, and friends. For each combination of context and receiver type, subjects are asked to estimate their communication competence on a 0-100 scale. In addition to a global self-perceived communication competence score, the scale permits generation of a subscore for each type of communication context and each type of receiver.

As noted in Table 1, the reliability estimates in the initial study using the scale (N = 344) for the total score and all of the subscores, with one exception, were quite satisfactory. The exception was the subscore for dyadic interaction which was only .44. The means reported for the subscores in Table 1 suggest that generally the college student subjects in this study felt more competent to talk with friends and acquaintances than with strangers and more competent to talk in interpersonal than in public contexts.

In subsequent studies other measures were collected from the same subjects who completed the SPCC. The availablility of these data (which were collected for other purposes) permit us to determine some of the factors which may be related to individuals' perceptions of their communication competence. Total SPCC scores have been found to correlate significantly positively with self-esteem (r = .27 and .36), willingness to communicate (r = .59 and .70), general attitude toward communication (r = .63), argumentativeness (r = .31), and sociability (r = .41). Similarly, significant negative correlations have been found with communication apprehension (r = -.57, -.68), alienation (r = -.23, -.45), anomia (r = -.15, -.32), neuroticism (r = -.16, -.25), introversion (r = -.35, -.46) and shyness (r = -.43).

These correlations suggest a substantial involvement of personality in an individual's perception of her/his communication competence. The strong correlation with willingness to communicate also suggests the potential of a meaningful impact of self-perceived communication competence on actual communication behavior. Such an impact may take the form of approach or

avoidance, however, and will not necessarily be associated with the competence of observed communication behavior.

Conclusion

This paper has been directed toward an examination of the role of self-report measurement in the study of communication competence. It is argued that this approach should not be employed if a researcher is concerned with actual communication performance. The alternative options of objective or subjective observation are clearly preferable for such purposes. However, if the research is concerned with subjects' perceptions of their competence, what causes such perceptions, or the outcomes of such perceptions, self-report measurement can be a useful tool. The SPCC instrument is provided as an example of a self-report instrument which can be used in such research. While this instrument appears to be valid as a measure of self-perceptions, it is not argued that it is a valid measure of actual communication competence. In fact, we believe that it is not, nor are other currently available self-report measures. Self-report measures used properly can help us to build our understanding of communication behavior. Self-report measures used as indicants of communication performance can only retard such efforts.

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Figure 1

SELF-PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE SCALE

Directions: Below are 12 situations in which you might need to communicate. People's abilities to communicate effectively vary a lot and sometimes the same person is more competent to communicate in one situation than in another. Please indicate how competent you believe you are to communicate in each of the situations described below. Indicate in the space provided at the left of each item your estimate of your competence. Presume 0 = completely incompetent and 100 = completely competent.

_____ 1. Present a talk to a group of strangers.
_____ 2. Talk with an acquaintance.
_____ 3. Talk in a large meeting of friends.
_____ 4. Talk in a small group of strangers.
_____ 5. Talk with a friend.
_____ 6. Talk in a large meeting of acquaintances.
_____ 7. Talk with a stranger.
_____ 8. Present a talk to a group of friends.
_____ 9. Talk in a small group of acquaintances.
_____ 10. Talk in a large meeting of strangers.
_____ 11. Talk in a small group of friends.
_____ 12. Present a talk to a group of acquaintances.

Scoring: To compute the subscores, add the percentages for the items indicated and divide the total by the number indicated below.

Public:	1 + 8 + 12; divide by 3.
Meeting:	3 + 6 + 10; divide by 3.
Group:	4 + 9 + 11; divide by 3.
Dyad:	2 + 5 + 7; divide by 3.
Stranger:	1 + 4 + 7 + 10; divide by 4.
Acquaintance:	2 + 6 + 9 + 12; divide by 4.
Friend:	3 + 5 + 8 + 11; divide by 4.

To compute the total SPCC score, add the subscores for Stranger, Acquaintance, and Friend. Then divide that total by 3.

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Table 1
Reliabilities, Means and Standard Deviations of Subscores and Total Scores on Measures*

	Measure						
	WTC*			SPCC*			
Subscore	Reliability	Mean	SD	Reliability	Mean	SD	Correlation
Public	.72	52.2	20.4	.72	68.8	17.8	.50
Meeting	.68	59.3	18.6	.68	68.8	17.1	.60
Group	.60	68.1	16.4	.67	76.1	14.6	.52
Dyad	.60	72.9	15.8	.44	81.1	12.4	.39
Stranger	.82	35.6	21.3	.87	55.5	23.6	.56
Acquaintance	.76	69.9	18.5	.84	77.4	15.3	.56
Friend	.74	83.9	14.0	.78	88.2	11.3	.47
Total	.91	63.1	14.9	.92	73.7	13.8	.59

* Converted to 0-100 scale.